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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 016961

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TAGS: PGOV KCUL SOCI CH

SUBJECT: BROADCAST NEWS: CCTV YOUTH MOVEMENT EARNS CHEERS, JEERS -- THEN DISAPPEARS

Classified By: Classified by Political Section Internal Unit Chief Susan A. Thornton. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

¶11. (C) Two young anchors unexpectedly debuted on China Central Television's 7 p.m. national news broadcast early this summer. The appearance of Mr. Kang Hui and Ms. Li Zeming, both in their early 30s, has stimulated debate about CCTV's direction and spurred rumors about the possibility of changes to the broadcast's format and content. The youth movement has attracted considerable media attention. Internet news portals and other publications speculated that the appearance of new faces signifies an attempt to attract more viewers at a time when competition from satellite broadcasters such as Hong Kong-based Phoenix Television is taking a bite out of CCTV's traditional monopoly of the airwaves. Media insiders expressed skepticism about the change, saying that no matter who the anchors are, the staid nature of the newscast will remain the same. In addition, the network appears to have quickly abandoned its new look. The young anchors have not appeared on screen since their June 5 debut. End Summary.

Anchors Away

¶12. (C) CCTV-1 News, the Chinese Government's flagship news broadcast, employs a regular rotation of four pairs of anchors for the national telecast that airs every night at 7 p.m. Until June 5, there had not been a change in the roster in about 10 years, media analysts said. As a result, when Kang and Li appeared that night, Chinese viewers and media took note. China Newsweek ran a two-page spread about the duo the following week and Internet news portals provided comprehensive coverage, including thumbnail bios of the new anchors accompanied by photographs. China Newsweek speculated that the arrival of the new anchors presages a larger CCTV effort to shed its staid reputation. Popular tabloids and Internet news portals even gave the matter its own handle: "The Face Change Issue," a reference to a form of Chinese traditional theater in which characters change identities with a swift switch of a mask.

"Northern Peasants Television Network"

¶13. (C) Observers have expressed skepticism about CCTV's ability to adapt to growing competition. In fact, the introduction of Kang and Li reflect a desperate attempt to change the network's image and increase market share, several contacts said. (Note:

A June 2006 ratings sweep found that in China's 35 biggest cities, the CCTV-1 nightly news broadcast has a 5.6 percent market share, which amounts to just over 7 million viewers, the newspaper Southern Weekend reported. End note.) CCTV's nickname is "Beifang Nongmin Dianshi Tai," or Northern Peasants Television Network, because the only people who watch it are rural residents in the northern part of China, said Rui Chenggang, a CCTV on-screen personality who hosts talk shows and programs about business issues. Around the country, people watch Phoenix, Rui contended. In Shanghai, satellite television options are proliferating.

¶4. (C) China Economic Times editor Zhang Xiantang separately agreed that many people are now tuning in to satellite television options and avoiding CCTV. He told poloffs that a debate had recently surfaced over a suggestion to rename CCTV, which in Chinese carries the connotation of a Communist Party propaganda organ, to "China State Television." The suggestion, made by intellectuals critical of CCTV's staid programming and resistance to change, was quickly dashed, however, according to Zhang, with an article in the People's Daily pronouncing that there will be no name change.

¶5. (C) Beyond news, CCTV is not even generating the most popular shows anymore, Rui complained. Hunan Satellite Television produced the smash hit "Super Girls." Li Xiaoping (protect), a producer at CCTV's international channel, separately made a similar point, adding that local television networks and satellite broadcasters hold an annual meeting to strategize about how to compete with CCTV. While the focus of these meetings tends to be on entertainment,

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she related that CCTV is feeling pressure to revamp its news broadcasts as well.

Style Over Substance

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¶6. (C) There is "absolutely no chance" that the introduction of new faces to CCTV News is a harbinger of changes to come on the substance o the broadcasts, said Xu Fangzhou, a professor at the Beijing Broadcasting Institute. Real television journalism is not about to appear. The role of CCTV News is to represent the Central Government and disseminate information on its behalf. While controls on news outlets remain tight, recent commercialization of Chinese media has caused a conundrum for CCTV, Xu maintained, in that anchors reciting news in monotone hardly attracts new viewers. Ratings remain relatively high among regular Chinese, but intellectuals and media professionals only tune in on occasion to engage in Kremlinology -- that is, to judge the standing of top leaders by their on-camera positioning during official news broadcasts, Xu said.

No Guts

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¶7. (C) CCTV brass has been debating changes to the flagship newscast for some time, said Li of CCTV-9. She said a rift exists in senior management over the issue. On one side, CCTV executives want anchors with gravitas reading the news. The older newscasters themselves feel threatened by the appearance of younger anchors, Li added. But she also reported that letters were flooding into CCTV headquarters complaining about the blandness of the senior newscasters. Several CCTV producers felt that given the fight for ratings, "we had to do something," Li conveyed.

¶8. (C) Nonetheless, Li and other contacts said the group that is reluctant to change won the argument. Contacts speculated that the senior anchors may have sought help from well-connected friends to force the network's hand. Xu of the Beijing Broadcasting Institute said he believes propaganda authorities were fearful that the appearance of the young anchors would send a "wrong message, especially to local broadcasters, that reforms are about to start" and told CCTV to pull back. Whatever the case, Kang and Li made one appearance and have not been back onscreen since. Media savvy viewers, many of whom are already critical of CCTV News, were unsurprised by (and unforgiving of) Kang and Li's quick exit. Reacting to the network's backtrack, Wang Feng, a journalist at the influential biweekly Caijing Magazine, voiced a view we heard from many media contacts. "CCTV has absolutely no guts" to make a decision and stick by it, Wang said.

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